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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how Community School District 2 has dealt with individual school variability in the context of an ambitious system-wide instructional improvement effort, and it identifies questions, principles, and practical ideas that can be used to increase the capacity of District 2 to engage in systemic improvement. The paper suggests that it is possible, by focusing on the fundamentals of teaching and learning in a sustained way over time, to realize significant gains in student performance. It contains the following five sections: (1)a description of Community School District 2 and its strategy for system-wide instructional improvement; (2) a discussion of the tensions between the assumptions of systemic improvement strategies and the specific conditions of the "real world of schools" as seen in District 2; (3) an analysis of the basic tenets of District 2's emerging theory of action regarding systemic instructional improvement and school variability contrasted with the district's "theory in use"; (4) an analysis of District 2's principals' perspectives on the systemic instructional improvement strategy, which reports the findings of interviews with principals in the first year of the High Performance Learning Communities Project study; and (5) questions, principles, and ideas for how school systems can handle the issue of school variability in the context of systemic improvement. Contains 2 tables of data. (NKA)

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Richard F. Elmore and Deanna Burney

October 1997

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Introduction

At the center of the current debate on educational reform is a profound problem of educational policy and practice: On the one hand, educational policy is increasingly premised on the expectation that all children in all schools should meet high expectations for academic performance in basic academic content such as reading and mathematics. On the other hand, students, families, communities and schools vary markedly in conditions that are directly related to academic performance. Large-scale improvements in academic learning require some level of consistency in instructional practice from one school to another, yet schools confront very different conditions that directly affect the ability of teachers to teach and students to learn. How do we reconcile the goal of high academic performance for all children with the reality of variability in the conditions that schools face in promoting academic learning?

The issue of school variability versus systemic reform of instructional practice is one of a number of issues we are studying in the High Performance Learning Communities (HPLC) Project, a five-year collaborative venture of the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center and New York City's Community School District #2, which is funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education. The HPLC Project has three broad purposes: 1) To study and document Community School District #2's strategy for systemic instructional improvement and how that strategy works at the system, school, and classroom levels; 2) To help Community School District #2 develop and implement explicit standards for student learning, with a focus on the system-level organization and management of instructional improvement in schools; 3) To develop research products based on the District 2 experience that will help other local school systems that are embarked on large-scale instructional improvement activities.

This paper is one of a series of products from the first year of the HPLC Project. It describes how Community School District #2 has dealt with individual school variability in the

context of an ambitious system-wide instructional improvement effort and it identifies questions, principles, and practical ideas that can be used to increase the capacity of District 2 and to increase the capacity of other school systems to engage in systemic improvement.

By large-scale, or systemic, instructional improvement we mean system-wide efforts to improve curriculum, pedagogy, and student performance in basic academic content areas such as reading and mathematics. Embedded in the idea of large-scale instructional improvement is the idea that teachers can learn, in a continuous way over time, to increase the depth of students' understanding of basic academic content in ways that cause students' measured academic performance to improve against some standard of what good learning is. The idea of systemic improvement works against traditional notions that it is the idiosyncratic conditions of students, communities and families that are the chief determinants of aggregate student performance in schools. It suggests that, while the specific conditions of students, families, and schools might be important in shaping aggregate outcomes, it is possible, by focusing on the fundamentals of teaching and learning in a sustained way over time, to realize significant gains in student performance.

This paper has five sections.

1. Context of the Study: A description of Community School District #2 and its strategy for system-wide instructional improvement.

2. The Collective v. the Particular: A discussion of the tensions between the assumptions of systemic improvement strategies and the specific conditions of the "real world of schools" as seen in District #2.

3. "Theory in Action" v. "Theory in Use": An analysis of the basic tenets of District #2's emerging theory of action regarding systemic instructional improvement and school variability contrasted with the district's "theory in use," i.e., how it actually responds to school diversity.

4. The View from the Schools: An analysis of District #2's principals' perspectives on the systemic instructional improvement strategy, which reports the findings of our interviews with principals in the first year of the HPLC study.

5. What We Have Learned: Questions, principles, and ideas for how school systems can handle the issue of school variability in the context of systemic improvement.

1. Context of the Study: Community School District #2 [1]

District 2 is one of 32 community school districts in New York City and includes 24 elementary schools, 7 junior high or intermediate schools, and 17 "option" schools organized around themes with an array of grade configurations. Its boundaries encompass major cultural institutions, wealthy residential and commercial areas, historic neighborhoods, and some of the most densely-populated poor communities in Manhattan. The geographical boundaries of District #2 extend from 96th Street on the east side of Manhattan to the lower east side, and from the lower west side to West 59th Street. The district includes affluent and middle class neighborhoods on the upper east side, diverse mid-town neighborhoods, Chinatown, Greenwich Village, Little Italy, Tribeca, and Hells Kitchen, all of which include both middle class enclaves and neighborhoods with substantial concentrations of lower income families and recent immigrants.

In the administrative structure of the New York City public schools, community districts are responsible for elementary and junior high schools, while the city-wide Board of Education is responsible for high schools in addition to the general administrative oversight of community districts. While this division of responsibility holds in general for District #2, the community district has, in cooperation with the city-wide High School Division, begun a process of developing small high schools within District #2 that are available to District #2 students who may want to attend them rather than the city-wide high schools. Each community district, including District #2, is governed, within its sphere of responsibility, by a locally-elected community school board.

The district's student population is extraordinarily diverse in comparison to most urban school systems. Its 22,000 students are about 29% white, 14% African American, 22% Hispanic, 34% Asian, and less than 1% Native American. About half of the students come from families whose incomes fall below the poverty level, and for 20% of students, English is a second language. Enrollment has grown steadily in recent years due to in-migration and the return of middle class students to public schools. This modest growth and the active pursuit of outside funding account for modest increases in the district's total budget during a period in which the city-wide education budget has been dramatically cut.

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[1] This section draws heavily on Richard Elmore and Deanna Burney, "Professional Development and Instructional Improvement in Community School District #2, New York City," March 1996, a forthcoming publication of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

Anthony Alvarado, who served for 10 years as Superintendent of District 4 in Spanish Harlem and for 18 months as Chancellor of NYC Public Schools, has been District 2 Superintendent since 1987. From the beginning of his tenure as Superintendent, Alvarado communicated that system-wide instructional improvement was his first priority, that principals were expected to play a strong role in that process, and that the main vehicle for improvement would be heavy investments in teacher professional development focused on curriculum and pedagogy in basic academic content areas. The district spends about 4% of its total budget on professional development for teachers and principals, a very large amount relative to other districts. The strategy began with a focus on English language literacy-- reading and writing-- with a heavy emphasis not just on fundamental skills such as decoding of written text but also on higher level understanding and the capacity to produce thoughtful and ambitious writing. In the last five years or so, the strategy has expanded to mathematics with the same emphasis on higher level understanding. As the strategy has advanced, this emphasis has extended in many schools to other curricular areas, notably social studies.

Along with two top aides, Deputy Superintendent Elaine Fink and Professional Development Director Bea Johnstone, whom he selected for their ability to work directly with principals and teachers in schools, Alvarado exercises a firm hand in personnel decisions. Through a combination of "counseling out" and retirement, he has replaced more than two-thirds of the district's principals and about half of the teacher workforce during his tenure in the district. He has also established the 17 option schools, small alternative programs with distinctive themes staffed with "directors" whose role is a hybrid between senior teacher and principal. These actions, as well as others, have communicated that instructional improvement depends heavily on the talents and motivations of the people who run schools.

As District #2's strategy has advanced, its effects have been manifested in aggregate student academic performance measures. When Alvarado became Superintendent, District #2's overall performance on city-wide tests of reading and mathematics was in the middle ranks of New York City's 32 community districts-- about 16th overall, which is where one would expect the district to be, since it is among neither the most affluent or homogeneous districts in the city nor among the poorest. In the latter years of the district's improvement strategy, the district advanced to the second-ranking district in the city. As we shall see, this marked aggregate improvement masks considerable variability in school-by-school performance within District #2, but the strategy has clearly paid off in terms of overall improvement.

The District #2 strategy consists of two main components: a set of organizing principles about the process of systemic change and the role of professional development in that process;

and a set of specific activities, or models of staff development, that focus on system-wide improvement of instruction.

Organizing Principles of District 2's Instructional Improvement Strategy

Central to the instructional improvement strategy is a strong belief system or culture of shared values that binds together the work of teachers and administrators around instructional improvement. We have identified seven "organizing principles" that shape the ideas and actions of District #2 personnel.

1. *It's about instruction and only about instruction*. The work of everyone in the District, from central office to principals to teachers to support staff, is about providing high quality instruction to children. This focus on academic instruction, as noted above, is manifested both in a general attention to teaching and learning in daily relations between system-level administrators, principals, and teachers, as well as specific attention to instruction in literacy and mathematics.

2. *Instructional improvement is a long, multi-stage process involving awareness, planning, implementation, and reflection*.. The District #2 strategy recognizes that principals and teachers advance through various stages in learning new ways to approach instructional practice. Cultivating an awareness of new forms of practice involves providing principals and teachers with access to new ideas and practices. Planning involves the design of new curriculum and classroom environments which can be applied in the classroom. Implementation entails experimenting with new approaches and receiving feedback from individuals with knowledge and expertise. Reflection consists of opportunities to discuss with others what has worked and what has been less effective. Teachers and principals are expected to be continuously engaged in various parts of the process of improvement in different domains of practice.

3. *Shared expertise is the driver of instructional change*. Isolation of teachers and principals is the enemy of improvement. Systematic sharing of expertise from both inside and outside the district helps to break down isolation and create an environment of mutual support and learning. Examples of shared expertise include formal and informal visits of district personnel to schools and classrooms, regular grade-level and cross-grade conferences on curriculum and instruction among teachers and principals, cross-school visits and team-work involving principals and teachers, and consultant assistance in schools and classrooms around instructional issues.

4. *The focus is on system-wide improvement*. "Projects" are the enemy of systemic change. The strategy emphasizes collegial responsibility among teachers and principals, working together across schools on specific parts of the curriculum and specific dimensions of teaching practice, a process of continuous instructional improvement unfolding indefinitely over time, rather than the implementation of a specific innovation or project at a single point in time.

5. *Good ideas come from talented people working together*. Instructional improvement is dependent on attracting, selecting, and managing talented people in relation to one another. District and school staff focus much of their energy on recruiting, supporting and providing continuous learning opportunities for teachers who demonstrate a capacity for high levels of performance in the classroom.

6. *Set clear expectations, then decentralize*. The role of district staff is to set clear expectations for what good instruction looks like in classrooms and what student performance should be. The role of principals is to develop annual professional development goals and budgets for their schools. District administrators, who make formal visits twice-yearly to each school, are used by the district-level staff to review progress toward the planned goals. Principals are expected to take responsibility for the quality of instructional practice in their schools and manage resources accordingly.

7. *Collegiality, caring, and respect*. Instructional improvement depends heavily on people being willing to take the initiative, to take risks, and to take responsibility for themselves, for students, and for each other. This view requires exceptional personal commitment not only to good instruction, but also to the basic needs of the human beings involved.

Models of Professional Development.

Professional development in District 2 is a general management strategy rather than a specialized administrative function. It permeates the work of the organization and the organization of the work. It is based on a belief that improvements in instruction occur when teachers receive more or less continuous oversight and support focused on the practical details of what it means to teach effectively. We have identified five major professional development models operating in District #2 that reflect the organizing principles outlined above.

1. *The Professional Development Laboratory (PDL).* The Professional Development Laboratory provides 16-20 teachers (Visiting Teachers) a year with the opportunity to spend three weeks of intensive observation and supervised practice in the classroom of an experienced master teacher (Resident Teacher). Highly qualified substitutes (Adjunct Teachers) take over the Visiting Teachers' classrooms during the three-week period. The Resident Teachers also make follow-up visits to the Visiting Teachers' classrooms and work collaboratively with them throughout the year. The PDL serves a variety of purposes: strengthening teaching practices that are in the early stages of formation, providing opportunities for structured interaction of teachers around basic problems of practice, and moving particularly effective practices from one school to another. The PDL is, in the words of District #2 administrators, specifically not viewed as a remedial solution for exceptionally weak teachers, since to do so would make it less attractive to highly competent teachers.

2. *Instructional Consulting Services.* District 2 invests heavily in outside consultants and in-district staff developers who work directly for extended periods of time with individual teachers and school teams on specific instructional areas in classrooms and schools. Much of the professional development is focused on specific instructional issues and is delivered by consultants working directly in classrooms through direct observation and supervised practice.

3. *Intervisitations and Peer Networks.* The district budgets 300 days of professional time for teachers and principals to visit other schools and classrooms, both within and outside the district. Likewise, principals are paired with mentors and "buddies" who are at different stages of development and who can inform each others' practice. Informal intervisitations occur on a daily basis as well, as peer consultation is a routine part of District #2 life. These visits have as their explicit purpose finding exemplary practices and bringing them into classrooms and schools.

4. *Off-Site Training.* Although much of the professional development is delivered directly in schools and classrooms, District 2 also offers extensive training in workshop settings outside of schools, both in the summer and during the school year. Distinctively, the district makes a continuous investment in selected strands of content-focused training over a long-term, so that progressively larger proportions of teachers are introduced to the same new conceptions of teaching in specific areas. In addition, much of the planning of off-site training occurs at the school level, and summer institutes routinely include follow-up support in the classroom during the school year. The district carefully

follows the principle that it does not invest in off-site training for teachers unless that training can be followed-up with school site consultation and oversight in classrooms.

5. *Oversight and Principal Site Visits*. District-level staff spend at least two days a week in the schools. These visits include informal observations and formal "walk-throughs," which focus on progress in meeting the instructional improvement goals outlined in the principals' annual plans. District staff review the school's plan and assessment data, meet with the principal and school staff developer, visit each of the school's classrooms, and hold an exit conference to review and discuss their observations. Following the visit, they prepare a letter which documents their observations and send it to the school for the principal's signature.

Emerging Themes

District #2's instructional improvement strategy involved a great deal of improvisation and opportunism in its developmental stages. But as it has developed it has organized itself around five stable themes that have implications for other local systemic improvement efforts.

1. *The phased introduction of instructional changes organized mainly around content areas*. Systemic change can't occur simultaneously in all parts of the system, nor is it possible to ask teachers to change instructional practice on all dimensions of their work simultaneously. It is possible, however, to create the expectation that system-wide changes can occur in certain domains and that over time these changes can reach progressively more content areas and more teachers. District #2 chose to focus its attention initially on improvement of instruction in literacy-- reading and writing-- and then on mathematics. As the strategy has developed, it has had spillover effects on other academic content areas, following school-level initiatives. Focusing on specific content areas allowed the district to demonstrate steady improvement in both instruction and student performance over time.

2. *The intentional blurring of the boundaries between management of the system and the activities of staff development*.. Management is about marshaling resources in support of instructional improvement, and staff development is the vehicle by which instructional improvement occurs. There is no distinction in District #2 between the daily administrative responsibilities of principals for keeping the school running and their responsibilities as agents of teacher professional development. Management is professional development. Principals and teachers are held accountable by district

administrators for improvements in practice and student performance related to the domains in which instructional improvement and professional development are occurring.

3. *A complex and evolving balance between central authority and school-site authority*. As it has developed, the district's strategy has lodged progressively more and more budget and administrative responsibility at the school level, while requiring principals and teachers to develop a common view that their jobs are fundamentally about improving instruction and to accept considerable discipline in the way resources are focused on specific content areas and issues. The district's strategy walks a fine line between exerting system-wide discipline around district-wide priorities and encouraging school staffs to take the initiative in devising their own strategies, budgets and plans. What holds this complex arrangement together is agreement on the centrality of staff development as a mechanism for instructional improvement.

4. *Unapologetic exercise of control in areas that are central to the success of the decentralized strategy, most notably the recruitment, selection, training, and retention of staff*. Calculated central authority lends focus, coherence, and discipline to a relatively decentralized process. The principalship is the linchpin of this process. In order for the strategy to work, a district has to be able to retain and train principals on the basis of their aptitude for and agreement with the notion that management equals the improvement of instruction. In turn, principals exercise influence on the process of recruiting, nurturing, retaining, and counseling-out of teachers in their schools to meet their school-level objectives.

5. *Consistency of focus over time*. The strategy avoids educational fads of the moment and focuses on a few important instructional priorities over a long period. This strategy reaches teachers directly in their classrooms through a labor-intensive consulting model and uses routine management and oversight processes to educate principals and teachers for their central role in instructional improvement. This process takes time.

2. The Collective versus the Particular: Systemic Change and the Real World of Schools

The District 2 strategy embodies one particular approach to system-wide change, an approach that relies heavily on professional development and a focus on content-specific instructional improvement on a large scale. The High Performance Learning Communities

Project (HPLC), however, is focused on a broader set of issues. The HPLC Project grew out of an interest on the part of District 2 in moving beyond its current strategy to one focused more explicitly on the use of standards-- both standards of instructional practice and student performance standards-- to guide and motivate instructional improvement. The introduction of this idea of standards-based, systemic improvement makes explicit an issue that has remained in the background in the early stages of the district's strategy: How do we reconcile the requirements of system-wide standards of practice and performance with the fundamental reality of school-site differences?

The central tenet of standards-based instructional improvement is that entire systems of schools can move collectively in the direction of more ambitious teaching and learning through a focus on common principles of instructional practice, explicit standards for student learning, and assessments that accurately capture instruction and learning. Embedded in this view are several assumptions:

1. That the ultimate goal of instructional improvement is high quality teaching by every teacher in every content area (however construed) coupled explicitly to standards of performance for every student in every classroom in every school.

2. That instructional improvement is a process that continues indefinitely in response to new knowledge, not a process with a well-defined end-point. As knowledge of instruction evolves, expectations for what constitute good practice and high-level student performance should become more ambitious.

3. That less variability in instructional practice is better, if the system is moving in the direction of higher expectations for student learning, and if the system is engaging in continuous improvement efforts.

4. That big effects on student performance, in the aggregate, can be achieved only by a concerted, system-wide effort at instructional improvement organized around common principles of learning, and not by "random innovation" in semi-autonomous schools.

5. That success in standards-based instructional improvement depends on the creation and management of complex processes of collective learning, or professional development, at each level of the system — the classroom, the school, the system as a whole.

6. That the special claims of schools and student populations to treatment of their special needs should be balanced against a dominant norm that all students can learn at high levels under the right conditions of instruction and support.

Juxtaposed to this standards-based view is what we might call "the real world of school." From this perspective, everything is defined in terms of particularities. Even in very homogeneous districts (of which District 2 is not one), individual schools typically view themselves as serving very particular groups of students and very particular communities. Both nominally "high-performing" and "low-performing" schools tend to develop their own internal processes and cultures which they view as "working" for them — that is, allowing them to survive in their particular communities. School principals and teachers have different competencies, different professional biographies, different levels of experience, and different ideas about what constitutes appropriate and effective instructional practice for the particular children they serve.

In most local school districts, the particularities of schools tend to overwhelm any attempt to create system-wide improvement. Teachers tend to focus on the unique characteristics of the students in their classrooms, adapting curriculum and pedagogy to the particular problems and possibilities presented by specific students. Principals tend to manage their relations with teachers around the perceived background characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses of those teachers and the daily necessities of keeping the building running in an orderly fashion. Together, teachers and principals form powerful preconceptions about the students who attend their schools, based on the social, cultural, and economic backgrounds of communities and parents. These forces, coupled with the daily pressure to get the work done, all tend to lead to a general tendency for school systems to atomize into collections of individual schools, and for schools to atomize into individual classrooms. For most educators, the world of the school is a world of particularities, rather than systemic goals and shared ideas about practice and performance. Not surprisingly, when educators are confronted with the idea of standards-- that is, system-wide expectations for instructional practice and student performance-- they tend to see only the gaps between system-wide expectations and the particular conditions they confront.

The magnitude of this tension between systemic expectations and school variability can be seen by using District #2 as an example. While District #2 is not a "typical" urban school system, if there is any such thing, it manifests many of the highly variable school-level conditions that characterize most urban systems. Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate this point.

Table 1. Demographic Data, District #2, By School

Public School/ Elementary	# of students	% Eligible for F/RL	% LEP	White	Black	Latino	Asian & other	<2 yrs in this school	> 5 yrs teaching
1	685	95.2	40.6	1.5	9.2	12.6	76.8	4.5	65.9
2	945	100	37.6	1.1	6.6	9.1	83.3	23.6	76.4
3	533	12.7	2.6	66.8	14.3	12.2	6.8	11.5	96.1
6	947	11.8	3.1	75.5	7.6	7.7	9.2	14.3	71.5
11	490	69.7	14.6	34.9	18.2	40.2	6.7	25.8	48.4
33	350	90.9	33.9	4.6	25.7	57.1	12.6	22.7	86.3
40	611	27.3	9.4	44	18.5	20.9	16.5	22.5	80
41	809	21.9	5.9	61.3	11.6	16.1	11	12.2	61
42	982	98.4	57	0.6	0.8	9.5	89.1	2	79.6
51	257	92.6	31.1	8.6	23.3	63.4	4.7	26.7	66.7
59	337	31.3	41.1	53.1	13.6	18.1	15.1	15.8	47.4
111	523	90.2	21.1	9.6	17.4	66.3	6.7	25	65.8
116	811	51.1	10.6	36.7	22.1	26.1	15	11.4	61.4
124	1118	71.7	27.4	3.4	1.4	2.7	92.5	16.4	65.5
126	361	88	20.3	4.4	26.6	35.5	33.5	23.9	63
130	1004	92	35	1.4	0.5	4.9	93.2	3.6	84
151	268	100	19.1	16.8	27.2	45.5	10.4	26.3	73.8
158	942	18.4	7.7	62.7	10.7	14.2	12.3	11.8	68.6
183	533	18	14.3	55	13.5	14.4	17.1	11.5	30.8
198	326	86	14.6	9.8	26.4	59.8	4	19.2	49.9
217	331	46.2	15	20.5	44.4	24.2	10.9	NA	NA
234	658	12.2	2.7	67.8	10.8	9.9	11.6	33.3	55.5
290	485	33.3	10	60	10.3	21.6	8.2	91.3	56.5
871	323	20.4	0.9	57.3	18.6	17.3	6.8	NA	NA
872	181	59.9	4.9	14.9	34.8	43.6	6.6	NA	NA
873	116	77.9	1.7	1.7	76.7	20.7	0.9	NA	NA
874	275	40.3	5.3	40.7	26.9	26.5	5.8	NA	NA
875	191	NA	0.5	71.2	11	5.2	12.6	NA	NA
890	120	34.9	1.7	55	24.2	9.2	11.7	NA	NA
892	235	94.2	19.7	10.6	20	65.1	4.3	NA	NA
893	159	86.1	20.2	3.1	27	44.7	25.2	NA	NA
70	363	81.6	28.9	11.8	25.1	53.4	9.6	9.7	74.2
104	881	52.6	7.2	20.5	19.4	26.2	33.8	9.6	78.9
131	1407	81.5	49.3	1.7	7.5	15.9	74.8	13.9	82.2
167	1316	21	10.9	32.8	17.1	22.2	28	17.6	66.3
218	260	NA	9.5	15.8	47.3	29.2	7.7	NA	NA
877	262	13.3	1.5	62.2	10.3	7.6	19.8	NA	NA
878	151	65.8	5.8	25.2	29.8	31.8	13.2	NA	NA
881	158	32.7	5	38	27.2	23.4	11.4	NA	NA
882	254	21.8	1.6	53.5	15	18.5	13	NA	NA
887	134	21.8	0.7	38.1	33.7	22.4	6	NA	NA
889	149	21.8	0	49.7	26.8	20.8	2.7	NA	NA
891	63	58.7	1.6	20.6	19	25.4	34.9	NA	NA

Table 2. Proportion of Students Scoring in the Lowest and Highest Quartile on CTB Reading Test, By School, Spring 1997

SCHOOL	Lowest Quartile	Highest Quartile
001	10.6	33.0
002	14.1	24.9
002	6.9	50.2
006	2.1	77.7
011	21.8	36.1
033	24.3	19.1
040	8.9	42.8
041	10.0	48.1
042	12.6	25.2
051	20.9	25.6
059	10.2	38.9
111	10.7	15.7
116	11.2	45.1
124	9.4	35.3
126	23.6	13.5
130	13.2	22.8
151	20.8	13.2
158	4.1	55.3
183	3.4	54.2
198	28.3	7.9
217	12.2	27.8
234	3.9	58.6
290	3.0	64.4
871	0.9	66.7
872	17.4	17.4
873	29.0	3.2
874	8.1	35.1
890	5.1	60.6
IS051	27.1	10.2
IS070	33.7	6.6
IS104	10.2	32.9
IS111	22.7	10.5
IS126	28.1	20.9
IS131	22.9	21.0
IS167	5.9	53.6
IS217	12.2	21.3
IS877	0.3	80.4
IS878	26.2	8.5
IS881	6.1	39.0
IS882	1.1	60.3
IS887	9.3	34.0
IS889	2.9	42.0
IS891	1.2	66.3
IS894	17.2	27.6
DISTRICT TOTAL	**11.0**	**40.0**
CITYWIDE	**23.9**	**20.4**

Table 1 presents a demographic breakdown of District #2 schools. Schools vary significantly in size, from over 1000 students to under 200. The larger schools tend to be established public schools that have a long history and a well-identified community; the smaller schools tend to be more recently-established "option" schools that have less history and are in the process of building a community. The proportion of students eligible for free and reduced lunch (a standard measure of family poverty in most school systems), varies from 100% to under 20%, with 18 schools having more than two-thirds of their students coming from low-income families and six schools have 20% or less of their students from low-income families. The proportion of limited English proficient (LEP) students-- predominantly Hispanic and Chinese students in District #2-- varies from a high of nearly 50% to a low of less than 1%, with six schools having more than 30% LEP students and 22 schools having less than 10% LEP students. Within the category of schools having high proportions of LEP students, conditions likewise vary considerably. Some schools serve LEP populations that are primarily Spanish-speaking, others primarily Chinese-speaking, some a combination of both. Some Chinese-speaking students come from well-established families that have lived in New York for several generations, while others serve predominantly recent immigrants, many of whom are not literate in their home language. Schools likewise reside in communities with very different racial and ethnic compositions. Eighteen schools are comprised of student populations that are more than two-thirds African American, Hispanic, and Asian, while four schools have populations that are more than two-third white. As in most urban systems, District #2 has many schools in which the student populations are relatively mobile. In nine schools, the proportion of students who have changed schools within the last two years is greater than 20%.

While these data don't begin to capture the full range of diversity among schools in District #2, they do set some of the initial conditions that could affect systemic improvement. System-wide focus on English-language literacy, for example, has very different implications for a school with 40% or more LEP students than in a school with less than one percent, not to mention the conditions that differ in schools serving large proportions of recent Hispanic and Chinese immigrants versus those serving large proportions of children who have been in the U.S. for a substantial period of time. Likewise, the conditions that accompany instructional improvement in schools serving populations of students who are predominantly from low-income families are likely to be quite different from those that serve small proportions of such students. Within the category of schools serving large proportions of students from low-income families, conditions also vary widely. In some instances, the schools are located in close proximity to large public housing projects with large proportions of families experiencing multi-generational poverty, but with an established community. A few District #2 schools also serve

significant groups of students from nearby homeless shelters, who represent less established families. With poverty and family instability comes mobility. The conditions that attend schools with large proportions of highly mobile students are likely to be very different from those that attend low mobility.

Table 2 presents data on student performance on the CTB reading test administered in the spring of 1997, one important city-wide measure of school performance. The data show proportions of students scoring in the lowest and highest quartiles on national norms by school. As noted earlier, aggregate performance on reading and mathematics in District #2 has shown steady gains from the inception of the district's improvement strategy, and the district ranks second in the city among community districts on aggregate performance. This overall performance, however, masks considerable variability from school-to-school, which is one measure of how difficult the task is that schools face in connecting improved instruction to improved student performance. Overall, the district's performance is remarkably high, relative both to national and city-wide norms-- 11% of District #2 students score in the lowest quartile, compared with about 24 % city-wide and 25% nationwide; 40% of District #2 students score in the highest quartile, compared with about 18% city-wide and 25% percent nationwide. Among the lowest-performing schools in District #2, the proportions of students scoring in the lowest quartile are high by District #2 standards, between 26% and 28%, but still close to national and city-wide averages. Within this relatively high performance profile, however, the degree of variability is substantial. Twenty-two schools have less than 10% of their students scoring in the lowest quartile, while 14 schools have more than 20% of their students scoring in the lowest quartile. Fourteen schools have more than 40% of their students scoring in the highest quartile, while fifteen have 25% or less of their students scoring in the highest quartile. Clearly, then, even when overall performance is high there remain considerable differences among schools in the difficulties they face in connecting instructional improvement with student performance, and these differences are played out in the myriad of variations in the students, teachers, and communities that constitute a school.

Even in a school system that has made substantial improvements in instruction and student performance, cutting across highly variable school contexts, then, the problem of school-level variability in the face of system-wide expectations persists. Schools vary. This is a reality of life in urban systems. How, then, do system-level and school-level actors reconcile the competing claims of school variability and system-wide expectations in the context of strategies of systemic instructional improvement?

District #2: Theory of Action versus Theory in Use

To explore the problem of school variability and systemic improvement, we engaged in two types of inquiry. First, we talked at length with key system-level administrators in District #2 about how they think about and respond to differences among schools. Second, we interviewed principals in District #2 schools to understand how they interpret and respond to system-level expectations in the context of the particularities of their schools. The result of our inquiry is a framework that captures what we call the "theory of action" behind system-level improvement efforts in response to school-level variability and a "theory in use" that captures the implicit and informal adaptations that system-level administrators make in the process of acting on their theory of action. This framework is an adaptation of the work of Donald Schon and Chris Argyris on organizational learning.[2] In essence, Schon and Argyris argue that organizations learn collectively by developing implicit or explicit theories of action that they use to respond to problems in the organization and its environments. These theories of action are manifested in the values and norms that people in organizations use to direct their attention and action in their daily work. We have applied this idea to understanding how system-level administrators in District #2 reconcile systemic improvement with school variability, deriving from our discussions with them a set of principles that they use in solving this problem. While this theory of action explains much of what District #2 administrators do in their relations with schools, we also found that it leaves certain problems unspecified and certain solutions implicit. So we added to the theory of action a theory in use that attempts to capture the implicit and unspecified parts of the problem. Schon and Argyris, in their own work, contrast the espoused theories of action that individuals and organizations use with theories in use, looking for discrepancies between the two and judging the capacity of individuals and organizations to learn based on their ability to reconcile the two. Our approach is somewhat different. Rather than looking for discrepancies, we have focused on the tension between the explicit, codifiable theory of action and the implicit and less determinant theory in use. By making this contrast, we hope to distinguish between those parts of the problem of school variability and systemic improvement that are relatively susceptible to codification and those that are more difficult to codify.

Theory of Action: Systemic Instructional Improvement and School Variability

We began our discussions with system-level administrators in District #2 by talking with them about specific schools in the district and how they characterize and respond to the differences they perceive among schools. Out of the specifics of these discussions, we drew a

[2] See, for example, Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method, and Practice (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996).

collection of general principles that capture their theory of action. In essence, these principles are the guides to action that system-level administrators use to make sense of the tension between system-level expectations and school variability.

- *Principle 1: Principals are the key actors in instructional improvement.*

District #2 system-level staff view the principal as the primary broker, mediator, modeler, and expediter of high quality instructional practice in schools. Their "ideal type" principal is an energetic person who is highly engaged in and focused on instructional practice. They expect principals to model good instructional practice in the classroom as well as in their daily work with teachers. And they expect principals to have strong interpersonal skills in dealing with both teachers and parents. Strong principals participate in the development of good practice in the school by focusing on concrete instructional problems with specific teachers, they actively broker and adapt system-level professional development activities within the school, and use their interpersonal skills to lead teachers in developing a common understanding of good practice. They are also active agents in the creation of a professional community in the school—in recruitment and selection of teachers, in monitoring teacher progress on instructional issues and the effects of professional development on classroom practice, in supporting norms of caring and collegiality, and in working with the school union chapter leader on issues affecting professional development and collegiality. Among the District 2 principals who come close to personifying this ideal type there is considerable variation in their personal leadership styles. Some are independent and highly-visible professionals with well-developed reputations outside District #2, while others are more distinctly products of the District #2 strategy whose energy is focused in their schools and in relations with other district principals.

The centrality of the instructionally-engaged principal presents two main system-level problems for managing variability among school leaders. One problem is what to do about principals who are not so engaged, either because they have strong personal views about the nature of the principalship or because they lack the knowledge, skill, or understanding to approximate the ideal type. The second problem is how to capitalize on useful differences in experience, knowledge, skill, and professional contacts among the instructionally-engaged principals. District administrators deal with the former problem through the use of management tools such as oversight, supervision, evaluation, selection, and placement. They deal with the latter problem using "softer" tools, such as

the management of collegial relations among principals and the creation of common projects among principals.

In the final analysis, though, principals are the primary mechanism through which district-level expectations for instructional practice and student performance get adapted to school-level realities. Superintendent Alvarado is blunt about the importance of principals as agents of instructional improvement. "With a strong principal in place, you can change instruction in a school by using professional development. Without a strong principal, the best you can do is reach a few teachers with professional development."

- *Principle 2: Each school presents a unique bundle of attributes with a unique set of instructional improvement problems for each principal.*

In their conversations with us, District #2 administrators began their discussion of each school by stressing the particular history of the school, its previous leadership, the personality and leadership style of its current principal, its community, its student population, its teaching force, and its current student performance profile. In these descriptions, they displayed an astonishing grasp of detail that could only have been gleaned from continuous and detailed interaction with the school. For them, each school was a unique bundle of attributes of considerable complexity. Each school had its own profile of development, its own set of current problems, its own array of school and community actors who were influential in determining what happened there. Each school also represented a collection of students who came from specific places-- from neighborhoods, housing projects, homeless shelters, and, for immigrants, from specific locations in specific countries.

This grasp of school particularities, however, usually did not translate into a set of excuses or explanations for lack of progress or success in improvement. Rather, the particularities of schools usually translated into a set of detailed ideas about the right "match" between the principal and the school, the most promising approach for marshaling district resources in the school, and the appropriate next steps for the principal to take in pushing the school to the next level of improvement. In other words, the particularities of schools were seen by district administrators as a kind of puzzle that required fitting the principal's and district's strategies to the unique demands of the setting. Only in a few cases did district administrators use the particularities of the

school as an excuse for lack of progress and in all these cases the explanations had to do with weak principal leadership.

Hence, for district administrators, systemic improvement required a high level of knowledge about the particularities of schools, but they viewed this knowledge as critical intelligence about how to develop the competency of principals to deal with their settings and how to adapt district-level resources to the unique bundle of attributes and problems in the school. Managing variability, then, consisted of developing school-level leadership appropriate to the setting and tailoring system-level responses to school-level realities.

- *Principle 3: Sustained instructional improvement is a process of bilateral negotiation between system-level administrators and principals .*

The critical role of the principal and the unique demands of each school setting lead in District #2 to a specific style of interaction between system-level and school-level administrations, which we characterize as bilateral negotiation. When asked to characterize how they deal with principals, district administrators described in sometimes excruciating detail how they nudge and cajole principals through a series of budget, professional development, and personnel decisions that are designed to surface and solve specific problems of instructional improvement in specific schools. In some cases, principals are extremely skilled and assertive in these negotiations, anticipating district administrators' demands and deflecting them for their own purposes. In some cases, they are recalcitrant and resistant to district influence. And in other cases, principals are more amenable to influence, asking for guidance and advice. In all cases, there is no question that both system administrators and principals expect to negotiate, and the process of negotiation is the main vehicle by which they arrive at a common understanding of what will happen around instructional improvement in a school. These common understandings have considerable force in determining what principals are expected to do.

In some instances, where there are particularly difficult problems in a school, the negotiations have a trial-and-error quality-- "let's try this solution for a year and see what happens and if it doesn't work then let's try something else." System administrators are frank in acknowledging their failures and missteps in negotiating with principals, and they often say ruefully that they have tried several tactics on a given issue that all have failed. In essence, then, bilateral negotiation is an arena for learning. System-level

administrators learn over time, through a process of successive approximation, what works with a given principal and school; principals learn, some with considerable sophistication, how to get what they want from the district through mutual accommodation.

- *Principle 4: Common work among principals and teachers across schools is the source of powerful norms about system-wide instructional improvement.*

If system-school relations in District #2 were strictly a matter of bilateral negotiation, then it is possible that instructional improvement could devolve into a series of specific decisions with little or no overall coherence. But district-level administrators employ a number of tactics for developing common norms across schools. As noted above, a large fraction of professional development in District #2 takes the form of activities designed to break down the isolation of principals and teachers-- the Professional Development Lab, mentoring and peer consultation, intervisitations, system-wide professional development activities. As the district's improvement strategy has become more sophisticated, so too has its use of common activities. Principals' conferences-- the monthly district-wide principals' meetings-- are typically conducted in specific schools, the program for the conferences is focused on instructional issues, and activities often involve principals observing classroom practice in their colleagues' schools. When Alvarado decided to introduce more explicit student performance standards to the district, he detailed a successful principal to lead the effort and that principal, Frank DiStefano (now a superintendent in a neighboring community district), led a series of work groups, composed of principals, teachers, and professional developers, to make student performance standards concrete and to reconcile them with the district's previous work. When the district decided to focus intensive professional development and instructional improvement on the seven lowest performing schools in the district-- the Focused Literacy Project-- the work of developing the plan was detailed to groups of principals, teachers, and staff developers working in those schools.

Common work around fundamental problems of instructional improvement, then, creates the "connective tissue" that cuts across bilateral negotiations between system-level staff and principals. The common work creates settings in which principals, teachers, and staff developers have to create a common language, a common set of norms and expectations, and a common view of practice in order to get the work done. Hence, the particularities of each school's problems are connected to a broader context of norms and values focused on connections among schools.

Within this common work, of course, different principals have significantly different roles and different levels of connection to common norms. Some principals are clearly leaders in common work; others are active participants and learners; still others (an increasingly small proportion) are relatively passive and inactive, although it is extremely difficult for a principal to avoid being involved in some type of common work. While principals differ in their exposure to and participation in common work, there is no question that the system-wide expectation is that everyone participates in the work at some level.

- *Principle 5: Instructional improvement is primarily about the depth and quality of student work.*

As District #2's strategy has developed its emphasis has shifted considerably. In the early stages of the work, the emphasis was primarily on what might be called implicit standards of practice. That is, the district, working with a few principals and teachers, identified a few key instructional strategies in literacy that seemed to have promise in improving student learning and focused on getting those practices into large numbers of schools and classrooms through professional development. Through this early stage, most of the emphasis was on setting expectations about teaching practice-- curriculum and pedagogy-- on the expectation that increases in measured student performance would follow from good instructional practice. It did. As the strategy has matured, however, district administrators, and consequently professional developers and principals, have focused increasingly on what they call "high quality student work." In their conversations with us, system-level administrators constantly referred to the fact that the first thing they look for when they visit schools and classrooms is evidence that students are working at high levels of effort on important aspects of academic content, that student work is prominently displayed, discussed and analyzed in schools, and that students and teachers are able to make judgments in their own daily work about whether they are engaged in important and challenging work. District administrators, for example, consistently ask students in the classrooms they are visiting whether they are working hard and whether they are interested in or bored by what they are doing. Likewise, a significant amount of the discourse between system administrators and principals during school visits has to do with whether teachers are engaging students in activities that challenge them and whether they can give evidence of the increasing sophistication and complexity of student work.

This emphasis on high quality student work has a subtle but important role in reconciling system-level expectations with school-level variability. As district administrators increase their focus on the quality of student work, they increasingly put their negotiations with principals in the language of common expectations for student performance and place less emphasis on differences among schools, students, and communities. Analysis of student work and evidence of productive work in classrooms becomes the common denominator for assessing the work of adults across schools. While different schools might have to employ different approaches to getting high quality work from different populations of students, the focus on the work itself creates a strong set of norms across the system.

To be sure, the presence of high quality student work varies considerably among schools, in the judgment of district administrators. In fact, in our conversations with district administrators, it became evident that they did not see a one-to-one correlation between what they judged to be high quality student work and the measured student performance of schools on standardized tests. In several instances, schools that looked relatively good on standardized measures were judged by district administrators to be extremely weak overall in the quality of work they were eliciting from students. Likewise, schools that looked less effective on standardized performance measures were judged to be much more successful in the progress toward introducing high quality student work. Asked if they had a theory to explain this finding, they said that some high performing schools were simply capitalizing on the social class of their students, and community support for the status quo, and not focusing seriously enough on student work, whereas some lower-performing schools were stretching their expectations for students in ways that should show up in future assessments. District administrators, then, see a high degree of variability in the quality of student work among schools; they see success in some places where it is not yet evident in standardized measures and relative weakness in places that look relatively good on these measures. They see their emphasis on the quality of student work as being an important source of system-level leverage on both high- and low-performing schools.

District #2's theory of action about systemic improvement and school variability can be summarized briefly as follows: Principals are the key agents in adapting and orchestrating system-level expectations to the particular conditions of schools, and their capacity to do this depends heavily on their skills in dealing with instructional issues. Schools constitute unique bundles of attributes, and skillful systemic improvement depends on system-level administrators developing a deep understanding of school-level particularities and tailoring their actions

accordingly. The skillful reconciliation between system-level expectations depends heavily on (a) bilateral negotiations between system administrators and principals, where principals are expected to actively represent the particularities of their schools and system administrators are expected to represent system-level expectations; and (b) common learning activities cutting across schools that create and reinforce system-wide norms. Increasing reliance on the quality of student work as the standard by which schools' success will be evaluated creates a language between principals and system administrators that focuses attention on a common attribute of classrooms, rather than characteristics that distinguish one school from another.

Theory in Use: Differential Treatment in the Face of Constraints

While the theory of action outlined above seemed to be visible and elicit in both the words and actions of system-level administrators and school principals in District #2, as we probed more deeply, we found that there was another, less explicit, tacit, and difficult-to-codify theory in use working underneath the theory of action. We characterize the tension between the two theories as follows: District administrators face serious constraints in their work. The most serious and visible of these constraints is time, the most valuable resource that any administrator has. Much of the investment in instructional improvement and professional development in District #2 has come at a serious cost to system-level administrative resources. In essence, Alvarado has financed a significant proportion of his strategy by deliberately reallocating resources away from central office positions toward school-level instructional improvement activities, leaving the central office District #2 with what many school districts would regard as an extremely lean staff. The bulk of the actual work on instructional improvement in the central office is performed by three people-- Alvarado, his Deputy, Elaine Fink, and the Professional Development Director, Bea Johnstone. For a system of 22,000 students, about 1000 teachers, and more than forty schools, this staffing ratio constitutes a major challenge.

System-level administrators cope with this challenge by making hard choices about how to allocate their time. For the most part, these choices are not explicit; they emerge from observing how district staff manage the myriad problems they face on a daily basis. As we watched this process unfold, we observed an emerging pattern of that we call differential treatment, a theory in use, operating in tandem with the theory of action outlined above. One analogy that helps to clarify what we mean by differential treatment is what happens in a hospital emergency room. Emergency medical staff have a relatively clear set of protocols (a theory of action) for how to handle the cases they confront in an emergency room-- what constitutes an emergency, what the appropriate initial treatment is for any given case, when it is appropriate to

move a patient from emergency care to some other type of care, etc. On any given Saturday night, however, the range of problems coming in the door presents a massive set of challenges to medical staff. While the protocols heavily influence their decisions, they are also forced to make choices among cases that aren't necessarily codified. Typically, these choices take the form of deciding which among equally urgent and deserving cases require the greatest attention at a given moment. Within equally deserving cases, then, staff must make hard choices about differential treatment.

To extend the analogy to District #2, every school in the district constitutes, in some sense, an equally deserving case, with some claim on the time and attention of district staff. But some equally deserving cases are more equal than others, given constraints on time. Some schools are at a critical phase of improvement, others are less problematical. Some schools present conditions that make them amenable to immediate improvement, some present problems that are more formidable and less susceptible to immediate improvement. Within a broad framework of systemic improvement, then, the task of district administrators is not simply to implement their theory of action for <u>all</u> schools, but also to decide, at any given time, which schools require more immediate and concentrated attention among the array of all schools.

We observed that District #2 administrators seem to group schools into implicit categories in order to direct and focus their attention. By an accretion of daily decisions, rather than an explicit protocol, district administrators choose to give certain schools and principals more intensive attention than others. We have created categories of schools that reflect these decisions. But there is a danger in doing so. Because the theory in use is largely implicit and fluid and not neatly codified, we run the risk of attributing more certainty and specificity to the categories of schools than is actually present in the decisions of district administrators. In fact, the categories are probably quite fluid over time. On the other hand, grouping schools helps to explain how differential treatment actually works to make the jobs of district administrators manageable in the face of serious constraints on time.

Critical to understanding how differential treatment works as a theory in use is the idea of a "zone of indifference," from the classic literature on public administration. Essentially, the zone of indifference is the amount of latitude, or discretion, a subordinate administrator is allowed by a higher-level administrator in the performance of a task. A broad zone of indifference means a high degree of discretion, a narrow zone means low discretion. Differential treatment, then, means that, in effect, principals and schools are allowed different zones of indifference by district staff depending on the immediacy and seriousness of the problems they present for broad-scale instructional improvement. What we found, in essence, is

that schools that are judged to be high-performers and low-performers are given a broader zone of discretion, for different reasons, than schools in the middle, which are judged to be, again for different reasons, at a critical phase of improvement.

The categories of schools that we infer from district administrators' actions are as follows:

- *Free-Agents*

  Free-Agent schools are close to the "ideal" in District #2's model of continuous instructional improvement and professional development. The principals embody virtually all the characteristics that district level administrators look for in building leaders, the schools have a clear identity and instructional focus, the teaching staff is largely the product of an extensive winnowing and selection process by the principal and is extensively involved in continuous professional development, instructional practice and the quality of student work are thought by district administrators to be consistently high from one classroom to another, relations with the community are highly supportive, and student performance is high relative to national, city, and district norms.

  These schools are treated by district administrators as "free-agents," in the sense that they have a high degree of control over their internal processes, they exercise broad latitude and discretion in how they put together their budgets and professional development plans, and receive very little direct inspection of their internal processes. Typically, they are also asked to bear a disproportionate share of District 2 "showcase" activity for observers from both inside and outside the district. In an important sense, they are managed "by exception" from the district level — they are allowed to do pretty much what they choose to do unless a highly-visible problem arises. In other words, they have an exceptionally broad zone of indifference. At present, a relatively small number of schools fall into this category-- no more than five or six.

- *With-the-Drill*

  With-the-drill schools manifest strong leadership according to the District #2 model but are in the early or middle stages of the developmental path that district administrators see as leading to school-wide instructional improvement. Typically, they have seen relatively recent changes in principals, who have been groomed and selected by district administrators. They demonstrate what district administrators regard as

reasonable progress on student performance measures. While teachers may reflect a significant range of practice, they are virtually all involved to some degree in professional development and, with a few exceptions, are seen by district administrators as making progress toward high quality instruction. Often, the amount of high quality student work in these schools is judged by district administrators to be highly variable but significantly present in most classrooms. These schools are "with-the-drill" in the sense that they are seen as engaged in a multi-year process of providing focused staff development, evaluating and winnowing out teachers, and developing a strong school culture.

Such schools receive moderate to high levels of support and scrutiny from district administrators. Their budget and staff development plans are given relatively close examination. Principals are likely to be asked during walk-throughs about their plans for specific teachers, usually the most problematical teachers. The principals are likely to be actively paired with other principals for mentorship. They are less likely than Free-Agent schools to be showcased to outside visitors or to be drawn into a helping mode with other schools. They are often described by district administrators as being in the critical early stages of development, both in terms of the leadership skills of the principals and the instructional practice of teachers, but they are viewed as essentially being on task. These schools have a moderate-to-narrow zone of indifference. At present, nearly twenty schools fall into this category.

- *Watch-List*

Watch-List schools generally manifest strong leadership and are on a developmental path in instructional improvement by the District #2 model, but they are singled out for special attention and intensive scrutiny for reasons usually having to do with lower-than-acceptable student performance on standardized tests, as well as highly variable quality of student work. Most are located in the poorer sections of the district and serve large numbers of students from high poverty and immigrant families. The district takes an active role in introducing staff development and instructional initiatives, the principals are likely to receive frequent visits and consultations, and teachers receive intensive professional development focused on specific domains of student performance that are of particular concern to district administrators. Some of these schools are open to outside visitors and most are involved in activities outside the district, but their task is essentially defined as intensive improvement of instruction within a relatively short time frame.

The Watch-List includes the seven lowest performing elementary schools on the city-wide reading. The district provides direct assistance to these "Focused Literacy Schools" to improve the literacy skills of low-performing students, including additional teachers, push-in programs, and frequent visits. One of the seven is on the state's SURR (Schools Under Registration and Review, a form of state probationary status) list, schools for special review and oversight. However, the watch-list is not solely confined to the Focused Literacy schools. In 1997-98, a total of 13 schools were considered on the Watch-List. These schools operate under a relatively narrow zone of indifference.

- *Off-the-Screen*

From the perspective of systemic improvement, the most problematical and interesting schools are those we characterize as Off-the-Screen. These schools are seen by district administrators as presenting formidable problems for improvement, usually because they lack strong principals, and the district has, for a variety of reasons found it difficult to change their leadership. These schools exist in a kind of limbo. Their principals participate in principals' conferences, they receive regular school visits from district administrators, and they have low-to-moderate teacher participation in district-sponsored professional development activities, but they are judged by district administrators to present conditions that make it extremely difficult to engage them in sustained improvement. They are judged by district administrators to present low or highly variable quality of student work.

Some schools are Off-the-Screen simply because the district hasn't yet developed an instructional improvement strategy that fully includes them. Some middle grade schools fall into this category simply because the district's strategy focused heavily on elementary schools in its early and middle phases. One school is on the district's list for closure, but no date has been set for a final decision. Some are closely knit into their communities in ways that district administrators see as counterproductive to high quality teaching and learning and to the district's improvement agenda. Interestingly, at least two of the Off-the-Screen schools a relatively high performers by national, district, and city norms, but are judged by district administrators to be extremely weak in the quality of student work, and therefore low-performers relative to what they should be. About five schools are considered by district administrators as "Off-the-Screen," i.e., neither particularly effective nor particularly engaged in the district's instructional improvement strategy. In general, they are perceived to be "unfinished business" by district administrators. In some domains, such as participation in district-sponsored

professional development activities these schools are granted a relatively broad zone of indifference, largely because district staff perceive professional development to be a relatively weak treatment without strong building leadership. In other cases, district administrators focus their attention on limiting the zone of indifference granted to these schools in specific areas, such as the hiring of new teachers, because they want to create conditions in the schools that would enable future improvement.

To repeat, these four groups of schools are heuristic categories, gleaned from listening to how district and school people describe schools and principals. They are not explicit classifications defined by district administrators at a particular point in time. Nor are the boundaries between the categories hard-and-fast. Schools and principals may move from one group to another over time, depending on what problems they are confronting and the degree to which they have responded to district oversight. In some instances, a principal and his or her school may be considered to be in more than one group for different purposes at different times.

These heuristic categories illustrate where the theory in use of differential treatment comes from and how it works. Of necessity, not all schools can be treated equally within the prevailing theory of action in a system of diverse school characteristics and capacities. Our observation of District 2 is that groups of schools receive significantly different types of treatment, within the prevailing theory of action, from district administrators, and this differential treatment is a key factor in the an overall strategy of instructional improvement. Thus, the question is not whether districts can do systemic improvement without engaging in some kind of differential treatment of schools, but what kind of differential treatment makes sense in the context of a district's overall strategy and the degree of variation across schools.

The prevailing theory of instructional improvement in District #2 attaches great importance to system-wide expectations for student performance, instructional improvement, and continuous participation in professional development. It also attaches great importance to the role of the principal in modeling the culture and practice of high quality instruction and in using professional development to improve instructional practice. The With-the-Drill and Watch-List schools seem to attract the most attention and resources from district administrators, but all schools are touched in some visible way by the district's strategy. Yet there are significant practical constraints on the capacity of district administrators to deal uniformly with all schools. Schools start from very different places, they represent different challenges in terms of their teachers and students, and district administrators have limited political, administrative, and financial resources to deploy.

The Off-the-Screen schools pose a particularly difficult set of problems for district administrators. While they may participate nominally in the professional development and instructional improvement processes, district administrators don't speak with the same confidence about what they need to do and how it ought to be accomplished. In some instances, Off-the-Screen schools represent the remaining exceptions to the district's leadership-driven theory of instructional improvement: The leadership of some Off-the-Screen schools is seen by district administrators as weak but, for a variety of reasons, it can't be changed in the short term.

How District 2 confronts the problem of differential treatment within the broader strategy of instructional improvement is an important continuing issue in District #2. This is also an important issue for system-level administrators in other school districts to confront; learning how to treat different schools differently in the context of a common set of expectations for improvement and performance is clearly central to systemic school reform.

The View from the Schools

We have described what instructional improvement looks like at the District #2 system level, but what does it look like from the perspective of principals and how do the views of principals complement or conflict with those of district-level administrators? Our interviews with principals reveal the preliminary findings. The findings from our interviews with principals can be grouped under seven main themes. We have used illustrative quotes from principals to underscore these themes.

1. *The principals clearly and consistently report the values and goals of the District 2 strategy for instructional improvement, even while their implementation of the strategy is variable.*

   The striking thing about our interviews with District #2 principals, as compared with principals in other districts, is the extent to which principals report — consistently and in detail — the expectations and values that shape the district's approach to instructional improvement. All have internalized the idea that ambitious instructional and student performance are the goals of the district's strategy. Consensus is strongest among principals of Free-Agent, With-the-Drill, and Watch-List schools, but even principals of Off-the-Screen schools give consistent accounts of district expectations. Reported a Free-Agent principal, "All our schools are very different, populations are extremely different, lots of different needs, and yet [district administrators] try desperately to make this one community." A With-the-Drill principal described "the

emphasis on quality teacher and learning," saying it "incorporates the entire educational community." The principal of a Watch-List school commented, "[District administrators] look at the culture that has been built throughout the entire district in practically every school, and yet it's not a carbon copy of each other....It's individual styles associated with that growth....They look at the entire picture and see this whole spectrum of change and positive energy.... They're proud of it."

The principals also recognize that District #2 is distinctive in its heavy investment in professional development and that this investment has substantially improved the quality of worklife in the district and the district's standing relative to others in the city. "The amount of professional development is incredible," declared a Watch-List school principal. The principal of a Free-Agent school reported, "I've worked in almost every school district in the city and have not ever seen any kind of professional development the way that this district is committed to it." The principal of a school considered to be Off-the-Screen said District 2 was "the really literate district par none of all districts in the city," adding "They put megabucks into staff development, and I think it's paid off." A Free-Agent principal remarked that the commitment to continuous learning was "so interesting you really lose sight of the fact that most districts don't work this way."

2. *Most principals perceive a high degree of differential access to district administrators and to resources for instructional improvement, and for the most part they approve of this differential treatment.*

Most of the principals perceive that they are in a negotiating relationship with district administrators, one in which they have the main responsibility for instructional improvement and student performance in their schools and for working out agreements for district resources that reflect the particular needs of their schools. The idea of tailoring and negotiating permeates the principals' understanding of their roles, the development of instructional improvement plans based on the distinctive needs of their teachers, the assignment of staff developers to their schools, and the accessibility of discretionary resources from the district to handle emerging problems.

For the most part, principals support differential access to and resources from the district based on needs of individual schools. "They adjust resources," reported a Free-Agent school principal. "A very successful school does not get a large professional development budget. This is my applied learning." Another Free-Agent principal put it more positively, "I think they have been trying to give more attention clearly to those

focused literacy schools and to those schools that need that attention," adding, "I recognize that these schools should be getting more attention." "They are very fair in allocations," was the comment of a principal of a With-the-Drill school. "They see the needs and give additional support. Budgets are school-based." This view was shared by the With-the-Drill principal who found that a high percentage of entering kindergartners had serious learning issues. "I think the district knows because we [get] additional resources and additional help." A Watch-List school principal noted the district's attention to schools "that are not succeeding" and said, "[District administrators] are trying to help us by hooking us up with schools that are.... When teachers are excessed from schools they are now offering them to come to us instead of just assigning them to another good school." A With-the-Drill principal reported, "We have been taken to the struggling school that has made progress over the last few years. You get the feeling that they are going to do whatever it takes to make progress in any place."

However, not all principals feel that the district understands the unique needs of their individual schools. Said the principal of a With-the-Drill school, "The expectations of the district are very high. I agree with them, but what has not happened are adjustments to populations such as mine. It doesn't bother me, but it bothers some principals." The views of a Watch-List principal bear this perception out. "They do not take into account the special needs of the school.... If they did we would have the kinds of resources and the understanding and empathy that goes with the frustration of trying to deliver the expectations....Guidance is a particular issue." An Off-the-Screen principal expressed a similar opinion, stating that district administrators "don't take into consideration the special circumstances" of his student population and "take a minimal view of guidance because it is an academic district." While agreeing that the district "needs to look at schools with more difficulties and give more services," a Watch-List principal concluded, "I have confidence that they will."

Principals also perceive that they have the option of "informed dissent" from the norms and prescriptions of district administrators — from the most general to the most specific — but, in the final analysis, they have to make their arguments in terms of instructional improvement to influence district administrators. A Free-Agent school principal remarked, "As long as you are successful, they're going to let you do whatever you want....The minute you have a failure on your hands, that's going to be a hard sell." A Watch-List school principal put it another way, "You're always held accountable, so you try to do whatever it takes."

3. *The principals perceive a more or less explicit matching of leadership to schools in District 2's assignment of principals, and they see themselves as having skills and aptitudes that are tailored to their settings.*

Principals think of themselves as having distinctive skills and attributes appropriate to their individual schools. Said the principal of a Watch-List school, "One of the things [the superintendent] has done well is match principals to the schools. I think [another principal] is magnificent for her environment... I don't know how frustrated she would be in dealing with this environment and this culture." The principal of a school considered Off-the-Screen expressed a similar view, asserting, "This place would fall apart if I weren't here." When asked if she compared herself to other school heads, a With-the-Drill principal said, "I really believe that our school, every school, is totally different. I know that I'm working really hard. I know that there's a major difference. I know that there's a lot more to do. I think our personalities are all totally different, so what would work in one place wouldn't, I wouldn't, it just wouldn't be me." A Free-Agent school principal provided a summary, "[The superintendent] tries to hire smart people... [He] promotes autonomy so that you're able to do what you need to do in your building."

Interestingly, when asked to describe what is distinctive about their individual schools, the principals spoke consistently in the language of the district's instructional improvement agenda — the culture of support among the staff, the focus on instruction , working hard, doing whatever it takes to support student achievement. Said one, "High expectations, no excuses, no exceptions." The principal of a Free-Agent school said her staff "share a common vision," noting she "hired all the teachers." Another said, "Teachers spend time doing hard work...tremendous amount of reflection. They work incredibly hard." A With-the-Drill principal reported, "People come together, share ideas, work together. [The] culture here is one of always reaching out." The "talk is all about teaching and learning," said another With-the-Drill principal. "Teachers are genuinely interested in their areas of expertise and fleshing that out." The principal of a Watch List school summarized, "This school provides a safe, positive and nurturing learning environment, integrated curriculum, thematic instruction, and individualized instruction. There is a focus on accountability, student academic growth, and personalized learning assessment.

The principals also report that they know their teaching staffs well, both as individuals and as instructors. A Free-Agent principal reported, "When I first came here I

put a sheet over the time clock and I said, 'I really want to get to know you as people.' And then I got to know them as people." Similarly, an Off-the-Screen principal said, "I know them very well. I sat in on all the interviews for them. I spend a lot of time with them. I have lunch with them." A With-the-Drill principal tied her familiarity directly to the instructional improvement agenda. "I know what their home lives are...their style in teaching...what they bring to the classroom, what I can expect to see...I can have some level of predictability about how they will respond to initiatives and new undertakings." She was echoed by a Free-Agent principal who said, "[I] know their strengths, what they are working on, what their needs are, if they really know and love children and respect me. I know how to woo them."

Principals see themselves as participating in a strong set of common expectations. Not unlike district administrators, they describe the important part of their job with terms such as "facilitator," "catalyst," "instructional leader," and "staff selector." Most say their effectiveness should be judged by what goes on in their schools. Reported the principal of a Free-Agent school, "You judge your success as principal by the evidence you see in the work of teachers and kids. And the fact that kids, when I go into their classroom, can clearly tell me what they're doing with their learning, they're articulate. How I see how I'm doing is what is going on in those classrooms." Similarly, a Watch-List principal said he judges himself by "walking into classrooms and seeing that the students are not bored, that they are very excited by how excited the teachers are to work together." A Free-Agent principal judges "how peaceful it is" and "how people seem content and yet the work is rigorous. ...the culture of this building....I could trade places with practically anyone on staff. They run the building." A With-the-Drill principal reports she uses "the eyes and ears of other colleagues. [I say] 'I want you to come in and not make nice, do a walk-through with me and give feedback.' I try to step out of the role and think about the critique that's offered."

4. *Principals perceive that they participate in a vertically integrated structure of values and learning opportunities that are designed to create a common culture.*

The principals understand that they are responsible for professional development and instructional improvement in their schools, regardless of individual teachers' competence or willingness to take this responsibility. Most principals participate and see themselves as responsible for enabling teachers to participate in networks, study groups, district meetings, and formal professional development activities built around a common set of expectations for instructional improvement. There is considerable variation in the

degree and type of principal participation, some of it based on experience and skill level and some a result of isolation, e.g. the Off-the-Screen schools. But the dominant pattern is that principals perceive a high level of vertical integration from the district to the school to the classroom in activities and values.

The principal of a Free-Agent school reported, "[District administrators] have high expectations for principals...[and] they're very good role models." She added, "I only hire people who are going to kill themselves.... That's really the philosophy that [district staff] send out: 'This is the way we will work.'" A With-the-Drill principal put it more succinctly, "[They] gave you the job and expect you to get it done." "I know what [district administrators] think of me," reported another With-the-Drill principal. "They think I've created a place that has the context for a good education to go on. They think that we have to work harder at instruction, and they should see it when they go to classrooms. And they think we can do it and it is not good enough." He was echoed by a Watch-List school principal who said, "The expectations for me are the same as for any other school in this district....The name of the game is that if you truly believe that there's one standard for everybody, you can't make as many adjustments....It's the same standard. Get the work done." A Free-Agent school principal put it somewhat differently. "[The district has] distinctive leadership that has a consistent vision and [the superintendent] puts his money where his mouth is, giving you the support you need. He also trusts you and leaves you alone which is really a blessing.... People here can be as brilliant as they are because no one is stopping them."

5. *Principals see themselves as among the key purveyors of an increasingly explicit and wide-spread "technical culture" around instructional improvement that has a distinct set of norms, a professional language, and a set of practices.*

Most principals have developed a common language with teachers about instructional practice and participate with them in an array of activities that reinforce a technical culture of instructional improvement. The comments of a With-the-Drill principal of what to look for in a effective classroom are illustrative. "In almost any class, it does not matter what subject, is the teacher presenting or modeling, sharing information or working on skills? Are students in groups doing individual work? Is the teacher not only being explicit about expectations, but also about evaluation and self-evaluation?" She added that in her school "teachers and students have developed rubrics. They are very explicit about what students are to do and they have conversations about what constitutes quality work." The introduction of standards and discussions of the

quality of student to the district has extended and deepened the technical culture, though there is still a significant degree of variation.

Most the principals are articulate in the language of the technical culture when describing their own roles. "My role is to create conditions to empower teachers to provide instruction, to be the teaching and learning leader," said the principal of a With-the-Drill school. Another With-the-Drill principal said, "Our role is leadership that is continuous and consistent....Finding out who your teachers are, what their strengths are, and supporting them to go with it...making time and resources available." A Watch-List principal reported,"[I'm] a motivator...hard taskmaster...impatient...a cheerleader...I should supply ideas in a vision...the environment where that idea and vision can be challenged." A Free-Agent school principal expressed a similar view. "Create an environment for people to be able to talk together...provide time during the school day to work together and to plan together...model working hard." A With-the-Drill principal described the school leadership role as "guiding and working with people as opposed to directing... [I] see myself as a colleague with teachers... [I] learn with teachers, involve myself with professional development." The principal of a Watch-List school declared, "[I'm] willing to do anything. Sit with a child, teach a lesson, get in there and read to the class...whatever is necessary to focus in on excellent instruction." Principals of Off-the-Screen schools provided variations from these views. "I know the district views principals as instructional leaders," said one, "but when you have so many intense problems, at times I can be the instructional leader but sometimes I've got to be the facilitator more because sometimes instructional leaders really don't know how to be facilitators." Another said that it is "difficult to stay on top of instruction."

As previously noted, most principals endorse the district's emphasis on professional development and believe it is having an impact on instructional practices in their schools. They engaged the "teachers are born vs. made" debate in a variety of ways. Some focused on the importance of an innate love of children. Noted a Free Agent principal, "Great teachers come with some kind of intuitive respect for learning and children....[You can] broaden people's repertoire of teaching practices, but you can't teach people to love and respect children." Another made a similar point. "The born part is how you think about kids...the skills part is different." Others focused on inborn teaching skills. "There is something to innate talent,' said a principal of a Watch-List school. "You can also perfect skills that are available to you which makes you a much better teacher." The principal of a With-the-Drill school noted good teachers are "born with an interest...but in a sense they're as good as what they want to know and what

they've been exposed to...so they need to know what's out there." [You're] not born a good doctor," asserted the principal of a Watch-List school. "Good teachers are always learning, looking to better their practice." "[Teaching] is a real gift [but] everybody can get better....It's the way they look at their own role that they can teach...it's like a miracle," said the principal of a With-the-Drill School. A Watch-List school principal reported "dramatic change" in the school. "Some teachers at the beginning of the year were really iffy... [They] went to professional development, got the information, put it into practice, but needed the staff developer or me to coach them through."

There is more variability in where the principals choose to focus their time and attention, some providing support to strong teachers and leaders, others to new or struggling teachers, and others on the "squeaky wheels." All feel they can't address all needs equally.

6. *Principals endorse for the most part the application of high standards across all schools and the view that school staffs should be held accountable for attaining them.*

Overall, the principals support the application of high uniform standards across the district and the responsibility of individual school staffs to insure that all children achieve them. Many argued that you do a "disservice" to children by "dumbing down" or lowering standards for special populations. "Standards is not looking at what comes easy," said the principal of a Free-Agent school, "but looking at what is hard work for children and what should be expected at every grade level." "You want kids to be lifelong learners," observed the principal of a With-the-Drill School. "Standards should be flexible, get higher consistently." A Watch-List school principal put it another way, "It's the same world. It's fair. And for me to say it's not fair would be to think less of my kids than I do of the Upper East Side."

At the same time, many principals asserted that high standards should be accompanied by "fair accommodations," i.e., adjustments of time and instructional strategies for student populations with particular needs. "I feel all my children are going to be able to get to the same point over a different period of time," observed the principal of a Free-Agent school. "It's unfair to lower standards for certain groups, said another. "We must adjust and provide more time and changes in instruction." Several principals stated that high standards require additional resources and services for children with special needs. "It is vital to have the resources to do the job; I don't think you can do it without resources," said one. "Resources in their community is the telling piece."

asserted a With-the Drill principal. "I think it is fair, providing we take steps to provide the resources and time and other factors that might inhibit kids from reaching the standard." The principal of an Off-the-Screen school asserted that high standards were not "a realistic expectation," but added, "I do feel that given enough massing of effort...smaller class size, more staff development, more guidance personnel...children can achieve to the expectations of new standards to a very high degree." The principal of a Watch-List school made a similar point. "I do get a little upset when the district says that want every child to be reading on grade level....They don't take into account the poverty of the child and other extraneous factors...We have to eventually get every child there....We might not get them there at the same time....I think the district is beginning to realize that, and that's why we now have the extended day and the extended year."

7. *Principals report substantial variation in their relationships with the school teacher union representative, but do not use union relations as an excuse or explanation for their own performance.*

Principal reports of their relations with union chapter leaders cover the spectrum — from fully collaborative and supportive ("very important," "terrific," "fantastic," "excellent") to indifferent or absent (doesn't stand in my way) to actively adversarial ("it's a difficult situation," "power goes to the head," "not for public knowledge"). Though some reported impediments to instructional improvement efforts, none used union issues as an excuse or explanation for inadequate progress in their schools.

Many expressed the view that their own position and performance as instructional leaders in their schools overcame even poor union relationships. Reported one principal, "I would have to be very careful...because she would sabotage things...she could do a lot of undermining, but now it's at a point where so many of the people are my people that it's really not an issue." Said another, "Most of the teachers here know that this school works whether [or not] the union person and I have a good relationship....so I don't think this person is important in accomplishing what I want to get done." Another saw the selection of the union representative as a vote of confidence in his own performance. "She is untenured, so they trusted me enough to I wouldn't get rid of her if she doesn't do what I want." Another spoke with even more confidence. "I truly believe that I have changed the culture of this school so that there is more allegiance to that culture than there is to the union."

The composite picture presented by the findings from our principal interviews is one of powerful system-level norms operating in highly variable school contexts. This pattern is represented in the degree to which principals are able to say, in great detail, what the district expects, to extend district expectations to the practical, daily requirements of their work, and demonstrate an understanding of how to operate within the norms represented by the district's theory of action. Even in schools that are considered highly problematical by district administrators, principals were able to give a thorough account of district norms, though they often struggled with their application in their schools. In addition, it is clear that the district norms don't just exist in the words of principals. We observed the development of a powerful technical culture within schools, in which the discourse between principals and teachers is focused heavily on the requirements of high quality instruction and student work, and much less on the individual backgrounds and attributes of teachers and students. While there was variability in principals' responses, the commonalities dominated.

Common Expectations and School Variability: How do We Reconcile Them?

Several major themes emerge from our analysis of school variability and systemic improvement in District #2: While District #2 may not be a "typical" urban district, it does embody a high level of variability among schools in all the usual factors thought to be related to students' academic performance-- family income, race and ethnicity, home language, and the like. By these measures, District #2 schools may, in fact, be more variable than schools in many urban districts. District #2 administrators deal with this variability in two main ways. First, they have an explicit theory of action that focuses on the role of the principal as conduit, mediator, broker, and modeler for district expectations, on an explicit tailoring of district resources to the particular situation of individual schools, on bilateral negotiations between district and school administrators over resources and expectations, on common activities that cut across schools and provide a "connective tissue" between diverse settings, and on increasing attention to the quality of student work as a common theme of improvement. Second, they have a theory in use that provides implicit guidance on which schools deserve the greatest attention and which can either be given greater latitude or less attention. In effect, this theory in use is a strategy of differential treatment for schools based on district administrators' judgments about the immediacy of the problems they present in a context of limited time. Seen from the principals' perspective, this overall approach to school variability and systemic improvement seems to have produced a remarkable degree of commonality in awareness, if not always in action, and a high degree of identification with the system's agenda.

Given this generally positive picture, we are left with several questions about the broader issues of systemic improvement and school variability that apply, we think, both in District #2 and in other districts working on the problem of systemic improvement.

1. *How should we think about "good" and "bad" variations among schools in the context of systemic improvement?* In assessing school variations, system-level administrators face a critical issue. Some school-to-school variations are evidence of diversity of students, families and communities, some are evidence of differences in the capacity of school staffs to engage in instructional improvement, and some are evidence of more advanced learning, informed dissent, and/or ingenious use of discretion. In other words, not all variations are equal, and not all variations are evidence of inability or incapacity to engage in instructional improvement. When principals and teachers plead that their schools are "different" in the face of the common standards of expectations, how are system-level administrators supposed to interpret these arguments? District #2 administrators clearly do make judgments about which kinds of variation are signs of success, which are signs of weakness, and which are simply background conditions that have to be dealt with in tailoring district resources to school characteristics. In learning how to make these judgments, it would seem to be helpful if we could be much more explicit about types of variability among schools and what they mean in the context of systemic improvement.

2. *What are the most effective ways to teach system-level and school-level administrators the skills of tailoring, bilateral negotiation, and the creation of common, norms setting activities that are at the core of reconciling systemic improvement with school variability?* In effect, District #2 administrators have created number of ways of dealing with the problem of school variability and systemic improvement out of their own learning over a number of years. Most school systems haven't gone through District #2's experience, and most system-level and school-level administrators lack the interest, skill, or motivation to learn a different way to operate because the existing systems in which they work don't reward them or enhance their skills in new ways to do their jobs. So we're left with a particularly difficult problem. We can treat District #2's experience as *sui generis*, a product of charisma and circumstance, an isolated and unique case-- most educators' favorite way of explaining other peoples' success-- or we can begin to think the through the problem of how one would actually develop the requisite skills in administrators working in other settings. We have no simple proposals for this,

but our experience in District #2 suggests that this sort of learning is best done in the context in which it is supposed to be applied, rather than in classrooms or conferences. Observing, consulting, and advising may be more effective ways of teaching, for skills like these, than lecturing and discussing.

3. *What role should student performance standards play in an overall strategy of instructional improvement?* As noted above, District #2 chose to focus its energy initially on what we have called implicit standards of curriculum and pedagogy, coupled with intensive professional development, in encouraging systemic instructional improvement. Only recently, within the past two-to-three years has the district begun to develop and implement more explicit student performance standards. District #2 has adopted a gradual, school-focused approach to the introduction of student performance standards in the district, working through networks of teachers and principals and focusing on the analysis of student work. As student performance standards develop, what role should they play in the district's strategy? Should all schools be expected eventually to engage in the same activities around the introduction of standards, or are there particular problems associated with particular kinds of schools that should be explicitly considered in the introduction of standards? In other words, how does the district's theory of action extend to student performance standards? Clearly, District #2's experience suggests that large-scale improvement doesn't just happen as a consequence of "getting standards" and "implementing" them. Most principals and teachers have neither the time nor the energy to engage in the kind of work that would be necessary to change instructional practice in a sustained way, in the absence of major changes in their conditions of work, of the sort brought about in District #2. Just as District #2 faces the issue of how to integrate student performance standards into its overall strategy of instructional improvement, so too do most districts dealing with student performance standards face the issue of whether they will develop serious instructional improvement strategies or simply lay the standards down on schools and expect the principals and teachers to cope.

4. *What are the future resource implications of the increasing demands of instructional improvement on school and district level personnel?* District #2 administrators at both the district and school levels do their work in significantly different ways than other educational administrators. They also work extraordinarily hard, and each year the work seems to increase in level and complexity as the district's strategy broadens to include more content areas, more schools, and more activities. Lately, the district

has also had to cope with large numbers of visitors coming in from the outside to try to learn about the district's strategy. At what point do these demands overrun the personnel and material resources of the system? How could the work be redesigned to decrease the load and complexity and increase effectiveness? Systemic instructional improvement is hard work. Most educators work hard, but apparently not with the same effectiveness as those in District #2. So hard work is not the issue; the sustainability of the work as the strategy gets more complex is a major issue. As noted above, Distinct #2 has financed a large share of its expenditures on professional development by stripping out overhead in the district office and making hard choices about non-instructional positions in the schools. So far, this strategy seems to have worked, since it has created a major realignment of resources and incentives around instructional improvement in the district. Most districts facing the prospect of large-scale improvement will have to face these difficult choices. Now, however, District #2 seems to be in a place where the future success of the strategy depends on paying attention to workloads and capacity at the district and school level and inventing new ways for people in administrative positions to handle the complexity of the work and the growing demands, while at the same time staying with the strategy.